

THREE NUGGETS FROM NBT

The Book Review, June 1993.

"Challenge of AIDS", by Khorshed M Pavri, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1992. pg x + 118, Price Rs. 25/-.

"Cancer", by S.M.Bose, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1992, pg xii + 86, Rs. 25/-.

"Endangered Animals of India and their conservation", by S.M.Nair, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 1992, pg viii + 104, Rs. 28/-.

One of the most remarkable things about post-independent India has been the extraordinary development of science and technology. We boast of indigenously developed space and nuclear technologies, of research institutes and of course of the third (or maybe even the second) largest scientific human resources in the world. Paradoxically, coexisting with all this scientific development is a thoroughly unscientific way of looking at the world. For a variety of reasons, a genuine scientific culture never really developed in our country.

One of the symptoms (and maybe even a cause) of this lacuna has been the non-existence of any kind of popular science writing. There are hardly any popular science magazines, newspapers have no regular science columns, and even the electronic media has by and large ignored science. This is the state of affairs not only in English but in most Indian languages as well, with the notable exception of Malayalam. There has been precious little written to popularize science among the general audience.

In this dismal scenario, there is at least one bit of good news. National Book Trust has recently brought out a series of books on Popular Science to fill this void. The books under review are a part of this series.

"Challenge of AIDS" is an attempt to demystify what is undoubtedly one of the most baffling issues to confront science in recent times. Not only are we nowhere close to developing a treatment for AIDS, we don't even understand the causes very well. The book covers a wide range of topics related to AIDS; from the origin of HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) to strategies of combating the pandemic. There is a lot of information here about the virus, the tests to detect the virus, the human immune system and the natural history of AIDS. The book has a very good discussion of the problems faced in developing vaccines for AIDS and the efforts going on in this field. The author, a former Director of the National Institute of Virology has been at the forefront of AIDS prevention programs and is thus eminently qualified to write about it. The public health aspect of this deadly epidemic is dealt with in some detail and the need to dispel several prevalent myths

about AIDS is stressed. Unfortunately, the style is somewhat uneven. The level of the book oscillates between that of a reasonably well informed reader to that of a complete novice. The presentation could have been more readable, and some of the material (like the tables) is more relevant to a monograph than to a popular exposition. Nevertheless, the book covers a lot of ground and deserves to be widely read. It is only by understanding the issues involved in this 20 century "plague" can we ever hope to confront it.

Susan Sontag has argued that two diseases namely T.B. and cancer, have held a special place in our thinking about illness. What T.B. was to the last century, cancer is to our present times, a disease both intractable and capricious. Indeed, the mythology associated with cancer has contributed immensely to its becoming "the" metaphor in medicine for the mysterious. "Cancer", is a book written with the aim of dispelling some of the common myths associated with this dreaded disease. The meaning of cancer and its common causes are discussed and some of the warning signals for the onset of cancer are described. After discussing some of the general methods of treatment and detection of cancer, the bulk of the book describes common types and sites of cancers. With the help of several illustrations, the symptoms, treatment and precautions of the various kinds of cancers are detailed. The most important message that comes across is that an early detection of malignancy is the best bet for its cure. With modern diagnostic tools like Magnetic Resonance Imaging detection is becoming more and more convenient. On the curative side, radiation, chemotherapy and surgery have shown results. But ultimately, it is in prevention that the hope for controlling cancer lies. The book is readable and informative, though here again the author seems to be confused about the audience. The book seems to be written both for the general public and paramedics. The general public and paramedics constitute two entirely different segments of readership and they are best segregated. Confusing them leaves both of them dissatisfied with the work. The information content of this work is good but the presentation is not up to the mark.

Did you know that in India, in the present century alone, the cheetah, the lesser one-horned rhinoceros, the pink headed duck and the mountain quail have become extinct? Or that there are only about 200 lions surviving in the Gir forests of Gujrat? These and many other fascinating facts are compiled in "Endangered Animals of India and their conservation". The book aims to create an awareness about the various rare and endangered species in India. A general introduction to our wildlife heritage and depletion is followed by a detailed compendium of the animals whose existence itself is threatened. This section is fairly detailed with descriptions of the animals, their habitat and habits, and the dangers faced by them in their struggle for survival. The text is supplemented by good line drawings as well as some photographs.

One message which comes across clearly from reading the book is that not only our wildlife heritage extremely rich but it is also threatened by a variety of factors. Thus conservation is a very urgent need and can be successful as Project Tiger has shown. One of the most

successful conservation efforts in the world, Project Tiger launched in 1973, has resulted in an increase from 1800 animals to over 4000 in only two decades. The author does not devote too much space to discussing some of the more contentious issues in conservation though. One would have liked, for example, a more through treatment of the issues relating to the rights of local populations vis-a-vis the animals, and the involvement of the local people in any integrated conservation program. These quibbles notwithstanding, this is a useful reference book which will hopefully encourage thinking about conservation amongst the readers.

The problem with all the books is essentially one of presentation. There is a lot of information which could be of great interest to the reader, but the style is not reader friendly. The hallmark of good popular science writing is always simplifying without trivializing and writing in a way to hold the informed lay reader's interest. Unfortunately the books under review do not come up to these expectations. Nevertheless, reasonably priced, well produced and on topical subjects, these three books are a welcome addition to the small number of popular science books published in India. One hopes that National Book Trust will continue bringing out books on science for the general public and also translate them into Indian languages. This small step will play an important role in promoting a scientific temper in our society.©

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